

"CLICHE OR CONFESSION
Matthew 16:13-23
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The incident recorded in the New Testament Lesson this morning is considered by many to be the most important event in the Gospel record. It contains one of two Gospel references in which Jesus used the word "church". It includes the words of our Lord, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church"; words which are inscribed across the cupola of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome; words on the basis of which the whole massive structure of the Papacy is built; words - the interpretation of which still divides Christendom. The incident includes another famous saying of our Lord: "Get behind me Satan": addressed to that same Peter.

But foremost about the passage is the fact that it represents Jesus asking a question about himself - first, in regard to how other people understood him, and second, in regard to the personal convictions of the disciples themselves.

Let's reconstruct. In terms of time it happened at the apex of his career, just before it took a sharp turn downward toward the long road of suffering, humiliation and death. The crowds were still with him: people from all over the countryside were literally flocking to him to hear what he said, to receive healing and forgiveness and comfort. To be sure there was opposition, but at this point it was remote, confined to the cities - primarily Jerusalem, surfacing only in the form of an occasional Scribe or Pharisee who sought him out in order to gather evidence and report it dutifully to the authorities. In terms of popularity it was the high point in his ministry.

And so he took a reading. "How are we doing? What are people saying about me? Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples reached immediately into their bag of superlatives. "John the Baptist. But better yet, some are putting you in the same league with the real super-stars, those heroic figures out of our past -Elijah - Jeremiah." "That by the way, is an honor not often paid to men during their lift-time. The significance

of the Presidency of Harry Truman, for instance, which almost no one saw at the time becomes clearer every year. And the man from Missouri must be chuckling over the irony of it all. In any case, people were responding very favorably to Jesus - comparing him with the greatest figures in their history. And we don't know whether Jesus was pleased with that or not. Much is ordinarily made of the fact that the people had actually failed to understand him: that their superlative comparison with Elijah and Jeremiah missed the real significance. But that isn't in the text. Jesus didn't respond at all to the report. Instead he turned the question on them, and suddenly the situation changes altogether. It's one thing to give a public relations report, an opinion about the feelings of the people. It's an entirely different thing to have to answer personally. "But who do you say that I am."

Peter answered it: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That was the breakthrough: that is what Jesus was looking for apparently. Did any of them see the truth yet? And so he said, "Blessed are you Peter - you didn't figure that out by yourself - God has revealed it to you - as he has to me. I am the one who was promised - I am the fulfillment."

If they knew that, however vaguely, they were ready to understand that he must suffer and die. And so Jesus began to lay out before them what he saw happening. And again Peter - "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." That is to say, the breakthrough didn't last very long. For one fleeting moment in time, Peter had seemed to understand, but now, with this reaction, demonstrated that he had not yet comprehended the essential thing about being the Messiah; namely, love that suffers and dies. "Get thee behind me Satan". He was as rough on Peter at that moment - rougher in fact - than on anyone else. In his mind, apparently, there was a great deal at stake in understanding the relationship between being the Christ and being obedient unto death. And Peter, just when it looked as if he had it, failed the test.

Obviously, with all that going on, it is a key New Testament passage.

It is important historically, but more to the point, personally. Because that question "Who do you say that I am" and the answer to it - have been at the heart of Christian experience for 2,000 years.

Let's come at it now from our situation. The issue for me in the passage is that it isn't much of an issue anymore. This Central Christian confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", has become in our day, I would submit, little more than a cliché. Partially, it is a result of living 20 centuries after the fact in a civilization heavily influenced by Christianity. It's a little difficult to sense the importance of a personal response to the question "Who do you say that I am" in a culture that baptizes everybody and everything with piety.

Partially, it's a result of knowing - as Peter did not - how the story ends. We know about Easter. Peter hadn't been there yet. I'm an avid reader of John MacDonald murder mysteries. One time I broke the fundamental rule: I read the last chapter first - and then the rest of the book. And you know, it really did spoil it. Not only the tension of wondering who did it, but even the masterfully complex characterizations - even the detailed description of cities and ships and hotels. It just wasn't the same experience - I knew how it was going to turn out.

And so, I submit, the radical impact of the events reported in the New Testament doesn't get through to us. When Peter says "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", instead of gasping in astonishment we retort: "Big Deal: doesn't everybody know that?"

By conscious, disciplined act of will we have to clear our minds and try to stand where the disciples stood. Helmut Thielicke observes: "Peter feels himself driven to a confession the madness of which hardly hits us anymore because, in the meantime, the words have become all too familiar. But at the time this confession was uttered, it must have been a powerful shock to those who heard it." (How to Believe Again, P.42)

Another commentator suggests that it is difficult - if not impossible -

to imagine the effect on a mature mind of coming in contact for the first time with the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor - the meek - the peacemakers?

The New Testament consistently portrays a man to whom people responded in one way or another. When he was born shepherds and kings moved, Herod raged, infants were slaughtered. Again Theilicke puts it almost poetically: "Wherever the Savior shows up everything, including the opposition, is aroused and swings into action. He awakens homesickness in the prodigal son but hate springs up in the elder brother.....there are men who find peace through him, but Judas, too, goes to work." (P.39)

Today, with the single and blessed exception of young people, the universal response to Jesus Christ seems to be a blasé shrug of the shoulders. If there is one thing the world seems to be saying to the Church it is this: "Whatever you claim about Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter very much." And yes, that's precisely what the church says back to the world: "It's just not important: we'd like you to join our club, to support our building project, to cook in our kitchen and serve on our committees. But let's not get all hung up over semantics: let's not allow Jesus Christ to get in the way."

That, it seems to me, presents the modern church - and modern Christians with the most important task of all - To be honest about Jesus Christ: to clear out all the underbrush; to wipe the theological slate clear and stand with Peter as that piercing question is asked: "But you - who do you say that I am?"

Sometimes the traditions and creeds of the past are not much help at this point. The early church violently debated the question of the nature of Christ and was nearly divided by those who held he was a god-like man those who believed he was a man-like God. The issue was resolved with the writing of the Nicene Creed - which uses philosophic concepts that are totally meaningless to 20th Century Americans. It is a less than meaningful act of confession for me to say that Jesus Christ is of the same

"substance" as the father - which is the way that creed puts it.

The confusion and lack of clarity that surrounds the issue is made clear to me by two personal experiences. In my first parish I was close friends with the local Southern Baptist minister. We were both just out of seminary - he was more liberal than his people expected - I was more conservative than the local Presbyterian realized - and we met theologically in the middle. Besides, my study was the only place in town where he could enjoy a cigar without being seen. I was preaching on the incarnation and the bulletin board in front of the church said: Sermon: "The Divinity of Christ." That caused a little confusion among the Southern Baptists, my friend told me. Because Southern Baptists are of the opinion that Presbyterians don't believe in the Divinity of Christ.

More recently I was talking with a very perceptive person who wondered whether Presbyterians believe in God. Because all we ever talked about was Jesus.

There it is - the dilemma - the issue isn't an issue anymore: the words have become cliches through centuries of use: the creedal definitions of the past use language with which we are unfamiliar; and our own style and practice are so ambiguous at this point that people are not sure what it is we are saying.

"Who do you say that I am" There's something about being a Christian that necessitates a personal response to that. And while this has been, and will continue to be for a few more minutes, a rather heavy exercise, allow me to make some suggestions.

Elton Trueblood - who combines theological expertise with a dynamic and personal faith, submits that as individuals we have to go back beyond the creeds of our church, back through all the phrases we have learned to use and begin, simply, with what we know. (A Place to Stand, Ch. 2 "The Center of Cettitude")

"Look first at the evidence" he advises: Time is dated on the basis of the

the birth of Jesus Christ. That is a fact. Lives have been dramatically changed by him and by the power he let loose in history: not just a few, but millions upon millions of lives. That is another fact. History has been changed - Trueblood points out that when you look at the whole expanse of history Karl Marx is not sufficiently revolutionary even to be mentioned compared with Jesus Christ. That, too, is a fact.

Following that line of reasoning there is a whole new school of theologians insisting that personal Christian faith must begin at the point of confronting, understanding and affirming the humanity of Christ. John A. T. Robinson, for instance, comes right out and says that the images of the past are destructive of the reality they are meant to define.

In a very provocative lecture Robinson points out that ⁱⁿ the past men could say that Jesus was the divine Son of God without at the same time denying that he was fully a human being. But today we know about genetics, for instance, and that same time - honored formula means to some people that the genes and chromosomes of Jesus of Nazareth were fakes: that he was not, really, one of us.

The New Testament begins with the total humanity of Jesus. He was not, as we seem sometimes to believe, an insertion from outside history, but one born in history - like everyone else. In Matthew's and Luke's Gospels long genealogies trace his ties with the human family back to Abraham and Adam and God. This was not, they were saying, a divine being coming from no where, but God coming into the life of the world through the ordinary life of a first century Jew.

The uniqueness of Christ in the New Testament is precisely here. In the life of a man God did something new. This life - related to all the rest - became the way God chose to reveal his love for all men: this life became the normative human life. In all his freedom and integrity and compassion, Jesus Christ was God acting in history - and at the same time, a man living human life as God intended for all men to live.

Regardless of what else we want to say bout Christ, we must be absolutely clear about our conviction that he was one of us. Every feeling you have ever had - was experienced by Jesus. Every fear of death you ever felt - was felt by him. He got as tired and angry and disappointed and frustrated as you and I do. When they crucified him it hurt - and when he died he too wondered why God in heaven had so abandoned him.

If we are to move from cliché to confession about our Lord I think it will happen only after we have affirmed and embraced him as one of us. There is a pop song that goes "Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee." And the beauty of that confessional act is in the fact that his hand will not lift us out of this "vale of tears", but rather be scorched and scarred by life along our own.

That's where Peter had to back away from his breakthrough. He did not yet know that this man, in whom God was acting, would go all the way with him and for him. He did not yet know about that love that suffers and dies in order to express itself. But we do know about it.

And to us comes the question "Who do you say that I am?" And we must answer as best we can. Our response is finally called out of us by the same love - not intellectually out of our minds - but out of our hearts.

John Baillie summed up a devotional essay one time with these words - after exploring all the ways men have defined themselves theologically:

"I do know that in fact it is the constraint of Jesus Christ from which I find it most impossible to escape. I just cannot read the Gospel story without knowing that I am being sought out in love...If there be someone who is aware of no such constraint, I cannot of course, hope to make him aware of it by speaking these few sentences.....

I am not now arguing. I am only confessing"

(A Reasoned Faith, P.118-119)

So, in the Presbyterian Church, one becomes a member, not by affirming an elaborate theological formula - but by an eloquently simple confession - "I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior - I trust him - I intend to follow him." And one remains a Christian, I would suggest, on that same basis. By going back, daily, to that incident near Ceasarea Phillipi; back past all the cliches - all the creeds - all the trappings - and confronting the man Jesus. "Who do you say that I am?" And confessing, in whatever words we have - You are the Christ - you are what life means to me - You are God incarnate - you are my teacher - my friend - and you I would follow. AMEN

FATHER, breakthrough our cliches, our comfortable and wordy theologies, and in this Lenten Season, help us to see the man Jesus - who lived like us, who loved and died for us. AMEN